

Arabic in the specialised literature on translation and interpreting

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Recibido: 8 de marzo de 2010

Aceptado: 15 de noviembre de 2010

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work is to investigate the research activity on Arabic translation and interpretation, to explore the most widely discussed topics, and to depict their recent evolution. The most remarkable results can be summarized as follows. An interest on Arabic translation studies is confirmed: it starts in the XIX century and extends through the XX century, where there is a slight but constant increase on the number of publications up to the 1980s. From the 1990s onwards, a big bibliography outbreak, that is maintained and intensified up to the present day, takes place. Likewise, from the 1990s onwards, the rise of new research topics is attested, just as it happens in translation studies research in general, although in the case of Arabic, traditional topics keep being strongly supported.

Key words: bibliography, arabic translation, history.

El árabe en la bibliografía de traducción e interpretación

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este trabajo es indagar en la actividad investigadora sobre traducción e interpretación árabes, explorar los temas más tratados y caracterizar su evolución reciente. Los resultados más destacables son los siguientes. Se constata un interés por los estudios de traducción árabe, que procede del siglo XIX y se prolonga en el XX, con un ligero pero constante incremento del número de publicaciones hasta finales de la década de los ochenta. A partir de los años noventa se produce una gran eclosión de bibliografía, que se mantiene e incrementa en la actualidad. Asimismo, a partir de los años noventa, se verifica la aparición

¹ This research has been made possible partly thanks to funding from the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science, through the project "Ampliación, desarrollo y aprovechamiento de la base de datos en línea BITRA (Bibliografía de Traducción e Interpretación)". Code: HUM2007-66784-C05-01.

de nuevos temas de investigación, al igual que sucede en el conjunto de la investigación traductológica, si bien en el caso del árabe se siguen manteniendo con fuerza los temas tradicionales.

Palabras clave: bibliografía, traducción árabe, historia.

Summary: 1. Aims. 2. Methodology. 3. Data analysis. 3.1. Time period. 3.2. History and literature. 3.3. Favourite topics. 3.4. Vehicular languages in Arabic translation research. 4. Conclusions.

1. Aims

The purpose of this work is to examine the interest aroused by Arabic in translation and interpreting studies and to determine which topics are the ones that are most commonly dealt with. It also aims to describe the different stages that this research activity may have gone through in recent decades.

2. Methodology

We believe that the best way to accomplish the goals set out in this work is to conduct a statistical analysis of the specialised literature on translation and interpreting.

Today there are several bibliographical databases focused on this area of knowledge that would be well suited to the objectives of our study. Perhaps one of the most important is the *Translation Studies Bibliography*, which is a bibliographical database on translation and interpreting sponsored by John Benjamins Publishing Company and Lessius University College. This database is an online subscription service that, at the time of writing, contains 16, 000 records and allows searches to be carried out using keywords which are organised in a thesaurus. Other resources worthy of mention are the *Translation Studies Abstracts* (TSA) and *Bibliography of Translation Studies Online* (BTS), two online joint-access databases published by St. Jerome Publishing. Like the previous one, it is necessary to subscribe to this search service, although the website offers a demo version which offers access restricted only to works published before 2004 and a search engine that also has limited functions. The site editor does not state the number of records included in this online version.

Either of these two databases could fit the purposes of our study (especially the first of them), but there is also a third that has several advantages over the other two. This third option is called the *Bibliografía de Traducción e Interpretación* (BITRA), which, in addition to being open access, is also the bibliographical database on translation and interpreting with the largest number of records. At the same time, a wide range of keywords are used to make thematic searches much easier. BITRA is international, interactive and multilingual. It is developed and coordinated by Javier

Franco, from the University of Alicante, Spain, and first appeared on the Internet in 2001. At the time of writing, it contains over 39, 000 bibliographical records – a figure that is continually increasing thanks to the updates that are carried out on a regular basis [<http://www.ua.es/dpto/trad.int/base/index.html>]. Javier Franco (2004: 223) describes it in the following terms:

BITRA is: 1) International, it includes works from any country and written in any language; 2) Annotated, it includes metatextual fields aimed at offering an abstract, commenting on special traits of the text or reproducing the table of contents; 3) Interactive, it allows users to propose changes in the existing data or the inclusion of new records; 4) Flexible, it allows searches to be performed using any criterion or combination of criteria; 5) Open and free, BITRA is easy to search and open to everybody without any sort of subscription or payment.

As stated above and for the reasons we have already outlined, in our opinion BITRA is the dataset that best fits the analysis we intend to perform. But its possible limitations should also be pointed out. First and foremost it must be stressed that the data included in BITRA are not a random sample (and neither are those in the other bibliographical databases cited earlier). The fact that the data are not random, however, could be its greatest shortcoming because it might not be possible to extrapolate the statistical analysis of the database to the general universe. Yet, a careful examination would almost certainly allow us to qualify this objection to a large extent.

On the one hand, we have a general universe X made up of all the specialised literature devoted to translation studies, regardless of the language used, and on the other hand there is the working universe Y , which is represented by the bibliographical records in the BITRA database. We do not have and we cannot create an operational random sample of the general universe X because its global, multicultural and multilingual nature would make it incredibly complex to produce.

Although this last statement is undeniably true, we do have access to a working universe, i.e. the BITRA database, which contains about 40, 000 records. For such a relatively young discipline, this is a very large number and in fact it would be reasonable to say that this database comes close to the general universe, at least as far as certain language domains, such as English or Spanish, are concerned. The fact that BITRA is being developed in a Spanish university and that the fundamental language used to communicate scientific work is English are the mainstays that characterise the database. This means that the more peripheral and/or minority the language area is (Eastern Europe, Asia), the more pronounced the shortage of bibliographical references is likely to be. Nevertheless, the extremely widespread presence of specialised literature written in English (as the language of science around the world) prevents such a shortcoming from being so important. Furthermore, this limitation would be partly offset by the very dynamics of BITRA, which does everything it can to include literature on translation and interpreting in and about any language.

In view of what has been stated above, we believe that the statistical analysis carried out using the data from BITRA could be extrapolated to the general universe of

the literature on translation and interpreting, except with respect to the languages in which those research papers are written.

Lastly, it must be pointed out that in this work we took into account the bibliographical records that refer to Arabic as both the source language (SL) and the target language (TL), i.e. the languages from which and into which the translation is performed. In this work, both cases will be referred to as ‘Arabic translation’.

3. Data analysis

The version of the database that was consulted for this study is that of 29/05/09. In that moment it contained 39,363 records and 835 of them were related to Arabic translation, which accounted for 2.12% of the total. We are basically going to work with this last section of the database.

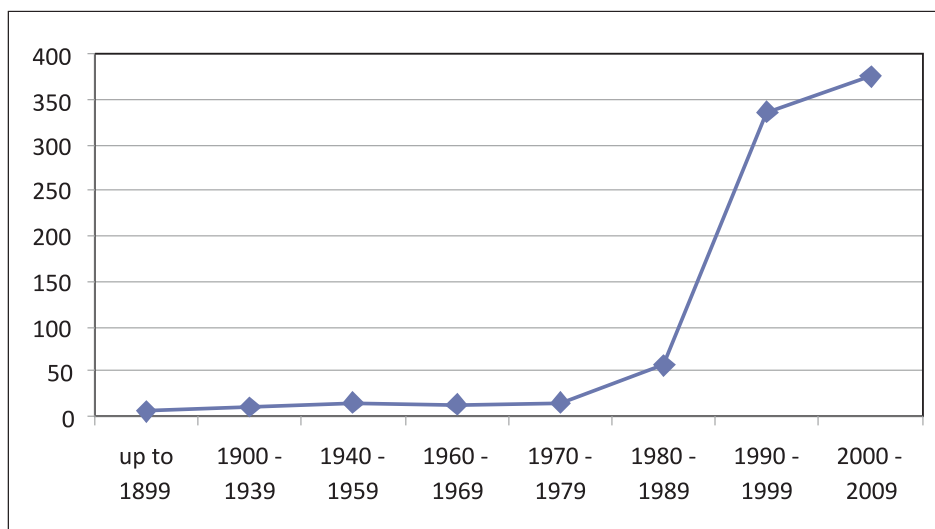
3.1. Time period

We will start by analysing a time sequence. The question we asked ourselves concerns the extent to which Arabic translation studies have evolved over time and whether there are moments when such development varies (see Table 1).

	number of records	percentage
up to 1899	7	0.8
1900 – 1939	12	1.4
1940 – 1959	16	1.9
1960 – 1969	14	1.7
1970 – 1979	15	1.8
1980 – 1989	58	6.9
1990 – 1999	337	40.4
2000 – 2009 ²	376	45.0
Total	835	

Table 1: Time sequence of Arabic translation studies

² Due to the date of the version of the database being used, some literature from the end of the decade has still to be incorporated and therefore the number of records would be slightly higher than the one stated here.



Graph 1: Time sequence of Arabic translation studies

Interpreting the above table is a very straightforward matter. Until the end of the 1970s Arabic translation studies were relatively scarce but had always been present and slowly but steadily increasing. If traced on a graph, this tendency would be represented by a line that gradually rose from the early 20th century onwards. The trend changed in the 1980s and more especially towards the end of the decade, when these studies started to appear in greater numbers. The process reached a high point in the 1990s when there was a huge boom in publications and the number continues to grow, although far more slowly, throughout the next decade, i.e. the first of the 21st century.

It is interesting to note that 85.4% of all research work of this kind has been published since 1990. This in fact is not at all surprising because it is in full agreement with other studies that offer evidence of an upsurge in research into translation studies as a whole since the 1980s (Franco, 2004: 224-5).

The increasing interest in research on Arabic translation therefore runs parallel to the growing amount of attention paid to research in translation studies as a whole. But, in addition to the general factors, perhaps we should also examine other more specific ones that may be related with the particular case of the strong increase in Arabic translation studies. In this respect, there are several ideas that could be examined in greater depth in future research. There is evidence of the existence of a direct relationship between the awarding of the Nobel Prize to the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfud in 1987 and the awakening of a wider interest in Arabic literature, together with the subsequent editorial promotion and translation into different Western languages (Camera, 1999; Comendador, 1999). To what extent has this interest exerted an influence (or not) on research into Arabic translation? Moreover, all the different

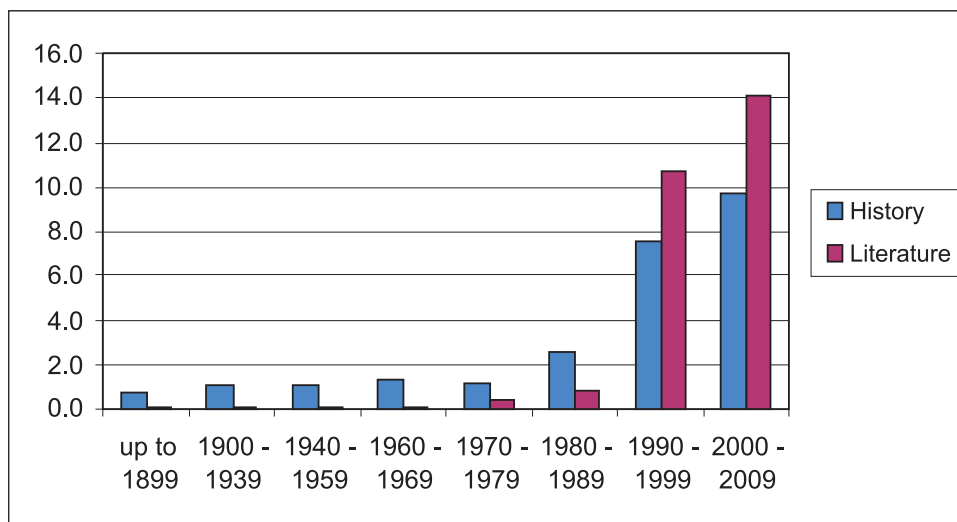
political and social events that have brought the Arab world to the forefront in the mass media over the last two decades have only increased and helped keep the West's attention on the Arab-Islamic world. Has this interest from the media fostered the increase in translation studies? Or perhaps, rather than political events, it is necessary to take into account the social phenomenon of immigration and the subsequent adjustment to the new circumstances of social services, such as the increase in social interpreting with Arab immigrants. And finally we would also have to examine in greater depth academic factors, like the birth and growing development of translation and interpreting studies in Arab countries. All these questions are there to be answered.

3.2. History and literature

At this point it must be remembered that, until just a few years ago, studies into Arabic translation were conducted within the field of Arabic philology and were therefore essentially focused on historical matters. Throughout the 19th and at least the early 20th centuries, scholars and philologists were predominantly interested in the vast number of classical works translated into Arabic within the framework of the *Bayt al-Hikma* of Baghdad or the inverse renderings completed in Toledo and other European cities during the 12th and 13th centuries. The following table shows another time sequence that allows us to see the extent to which this type of historical research is maintained and is growing, although it now has to compete with other studies such as those given over to literary translation.

	History		Literature	
	records	percentage	records	percentage
up to 1899	6	0.7	1	0.1
1900 – 1939	9	1.1	1	0.1
1940 – 1959	9	1.1	1	0.1
1960 – 1969	11	1.3	1	0.1
1970 – 1979	10	1.2	4	0.5
1980 – 1989	22	2.6	7	0.8
1990 – 1999	63	7.5	89	10.7
2000 – 2009	81	9.7	118	14.1

Table 2: Time sequence of Arabic translation studies: history and literature
(over a total of 835 records)



Graph 2: Time sequence of Arabic translation studies: history and literature

By crossing the data from Tables 1 and 2, it can be seen that most of the research on Arabic translation prior to the year 1980 was very specifically focused on the history of translation. A look at Table 2 shows us how an interest in literary translation studies sprang up in the 1970s and 1980s. This interest underwent an enormous growth in the 1990s to the point where it overtook studies on the history of translation, which also clearly increased, and this tendency has continued throughout the first decade of the present century. Several factors that could account for this phenomenon were mentioned earlier and include, among others, a growing interest in Arabic literature in Europe following the winning of the Nobel Prize by Naguib Mahfud. Nevertheless, it may also be due to a general trend in translation studies.

3.3. *Favourite topics*

Within the field of Arabic translation, as also occurs in other languages, studies into the history of translation and literary translation prevailed throughout the greater part of the 20th century. In the very late 1980s and early 1990s not only was there a considerable increase in the amount of research conducted on Arabic translation, but a large number of new research topics also appeared.

The system of keywords used to label the BITRA records by topics makes it somewhat easier for us to investigate this point. In the following table the bibliography on Arabic translation is compared with the bibliography of the whole database, in terms of the most frequently repeated topics. In order to facilitate observation of the data, we decided to simplify our table as much as possible and group

some of the labels, such as *technical and journalism* or *literature and music*, for example. To understand the meaning of the labels correctly, it should be remembered that because all the bibliography is closely related to translation studies, the label *pedagogy* refers to studies about teaching translation and interpreting; the label *profession* is used to refer to the translator or interpreter as a professional; and the label *issue* is concerned with any kind of linguistic and sociolinguistic topics that authors have recurrently put forward, as such *ambiguity*, *interference*, *slang*, *register*, *quality*, *phraseology*, *culture*, and so forth.³

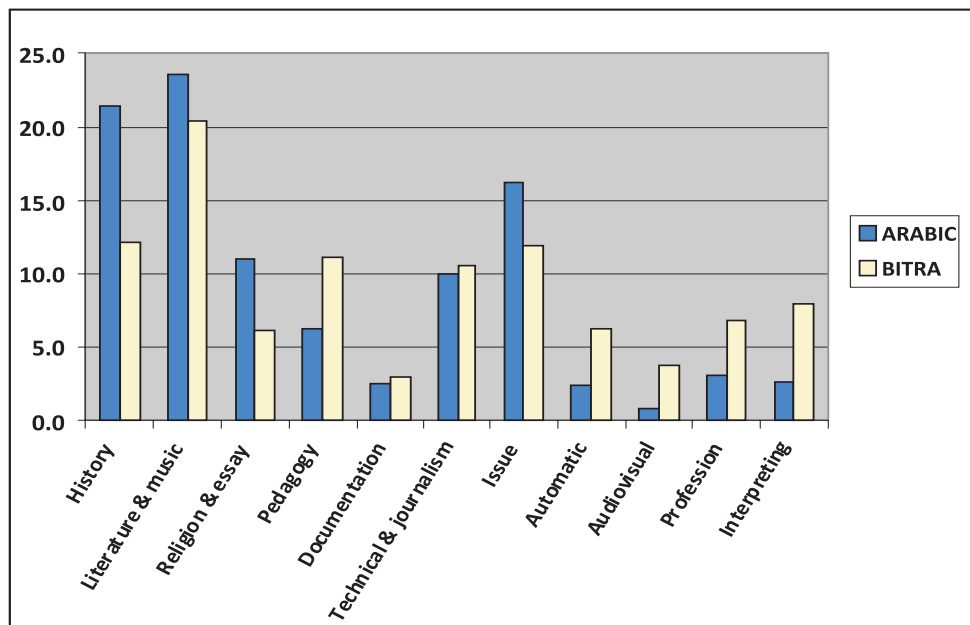
	ARABIC		BITRA	
	records	percentage	records	percentage
History	211	21.5	5501	12.1
Literature and music	231	23.5	9301	20.4
Religion and essay	108	11.0	2818	6.2
Pedagogy	61	6.2	5067	11.1
Documentation	25	2.5	1314	2.9
Technical and journalism	99	10.1	4783	10.5
Issue	159	16.2	5411	11.9
Automatic	24	2.4	2866	6.3
Audiovisual	8	0.8	1724	3.8
Profession	30	3.1	3122	6.9
Interpreting	27	2.7	3629	8.0
Total	983		45,536	

Table 3: Favourite topics

The following observations should be made in relation to the previous table. First, there is no point in elaborating a time sequence here because the vast majority of topics only appear over the last two decades. Indeed, except for the topics of history, literature, and essay and religion, the rest of the topics are practically new and have appeared since the 1980s. Of these new contents, the favourites appear to be those of a more speculative nature (issue). However, studies on the translation of specialised languages (especially legal-economic and journalistic translation) are particularly well represented, as are (albeit to a lesser extent) translation applied to technologies (automatic and audiovisual) and translation related to the profession and the social services (profession, interpreting). From another point of view, it is

³ The original full list and its hierarchy can be consulted on the BITRA website: <http://www.ua.es/dpto/trad.int/base/palabras.html> [Last accessed: 10 Nov. 2009.].

interesting to note the different percentages of Arabic translation studies with respect to translation studies considered as a whole (ARABIC and BITRA in the table). Hence, a slightly conservative tendency is detected, with greater emphasis on more traditional studies such as the history of translation, literary translation and the translation of religious and philosophical texts. Perhaps this trait can be accounted for by the interest in mediaeval culture shown by Arabic philology. In contrast, Arabic translation studies are proportionally less inclined to address more novel or innovative topics, e.g. interpreting, translation as a profession, translation technology, audiovisual translation and also even those devoted to the teaching of translation.



Graph 3: Favourite topics

3.4. Vehicular languages in Arabic translation research

Let us now go on to look at the distribution of the languages in which the studies are written. This will, to a certain extent, reflect the interest aroused by Arabic translation studies in different cultural or national domains. Nevertheless, on this point we must proceed with caution and avoid extrapolating data, as we warned earlier in section 2, and we will have to get by with just a few speculations and questions. The data can be understood better if presented as in Table 4, which shows the vehicular languages used in the research works on Arabic translation, and Table 5, which contains the vehicular languages that are most commonly represented in the database as a whole.

language	records	percentage
English	383	43.8
Spanish	269	30.8
French	135	15.4
German	31	3.5
Arabic	27	3.1
Italian	17	1.9
Catalan	8	0.9
Others	4	0.5
total	874 ⁴	

Table 4: Vehicular languages of the research works on Arabic translation

language	records	percentage
English	19,498	47.6
Spanish	8,019	19.6
French	5,632	13.7
German	4,022	9.8
Italian	915	2.2
Portuguese	714	1.7
Catalan	613	1.5
Galician	260	0.6
Russian	247	0.6
Dutch	225	0.5
Chinese	150	0.4
Arabic	52	0.1
Others	645	1.6
total	40,992 ⁵	

Table 5: Vehicular languages of the research works in BITRA

⁴ Some records contain several languages, for example in the proceedings of congresses and books written collectively, and this explains why this number (874) is greater than the number of research works on Arabic translation (835).

⁵ As commented in relation to the previous table, some records include several languages. These are usually congress proceedings and collectively written books in which more than one language is used; they may also be texts that have been translated into other languages and this explains why the total number is greater than the number of records included in the version of the database that was used.

In line with what was pointed out earlier, the following observations must be restricted to the contents of this database; they cannot be extrapolated any further, except perhaps to include the bibliography that is accessed or processed by Spanish academic centres. Why are there more records in Spanish than in French? On the one hand, bibliographical records for a database compiled in Spain, as is the case of BITRA, can logically be expected to be written in Spanish, which can also be seen in Table 5. On the other hand, however, it is also necessary to bear in mind that, at least in the early 20th century, historical studies on Al-Andalus aroused a huge amount of interest in Spain and the work carried out in that period on translating Arab philosophy and science into Latin is one of the key topics of our local bibliography. The appearance of scientific works in Catalan may have the same explanation behind it, although the appearance of Catalan as an academic language in the last few decades is a phenomenon that must also be taken into account. On comparing the last two tables, another rather surprising case is that of German, with 3.5% of the articles about Arabic translation and 9.8% overall.

4. Conclusions

Studies on translation in the sphere of the Arabic language exhibit a certain degree of conservatism and still have a largely philological bias tending towards historical, ideological and literary topics. In comparison with the general tendencies of the bibliography on translation, studies on interpreting, translation pedagogy and professional issues are lacking, while a great deal of work is still being published on the history of translation and religious topics. Likewise, studies that focus on legal and journalistic translation, as well as those devoted to the problems of translation, appear on a regular basis. As regards their evolution, first we could consider an initial stage that begins in the 19th century and extends up to the 1980s and which is purely philological and with an interest focused on history. There is then a second stage, which started in the 1980s but developed mainly in the 1990s. This period witnessed a boom in the specialised literature on Arabic translation, which was characterised by going beyond the traditional topics and the appearance of new contents that were more in line with translation studies in general, although still with a rather traditional bias, as pointed out above. Finally, as regards the vehicular language used, and although the database does not allow us to reach very solid conclusions on this point, English can clearly be seen to be the unrivalled leader as the language of communication in this field, as is to be expected nowadays. Nevertheless, the existence of an important body of specialised literature published in Spanish also stands out as a prominent feature.

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